

When Fasces Aren't Fascist

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CAROL M. HIGHSMITH/THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NY Fasces, a traditional symbol of state power, are a prominent architectural motif on many Washington, D.C., structures built in the 1930s, including the Supreme Court, . . . JIM LO SCALZO/EPA/CORBIS . . . the Department of Justice building, . . . THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NY . . . and the Arlington Memorial Bridge. RUE DES ARCHIVES / THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NY Mussolini's enthusiasm for fasces caused no backlash against them in the United States, even after he became an enemy of the country.

More than 60 years ago, George Orwell observed that the word "fascism" had been so widely used as a political epithet that it had lost all meaning. That remains true today, as partisans across the political spectrum still enjoy using the term, mostly in a figurative sense, to excoriate their opposition. With the word so freely and easily tossed about, it's a wonder that no one has thought to apply it, if only for provocation's sake, to structures that bear actual fascist symbols—those of the United States government, no less. Bizarre as it seems, many federal buildings in Washington were designed prominently with fasces, the emblem of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's twentieth-century regime. Even more surprisingly, these structures were erected in the 1920s and 1930s—just as Mussolini was ornamenting Italy's government buildings with the same symbol.

Sixty-nine years after Il Duce's death, Washington's public buildings remain bedecked with these symbols. Twelve large fasces, for example, adorn the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the Department of Justice building—in relief on the attic level,

directly above the engraving of the department's name. The bas-reliefs on the flagpoles at the Supreme Court, done by the architect Cass Gilbert in 1935, also feature fasces as one of seven symbols of justice's manifold attributes. (Here, the fasces look particularly incongruous. The building's classicism—with its Corinthian columns and triangular pediment—is in the ornate Greek style, not the more pared-down and severe Roman style.) And that's just for starters.



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The federal fasces have oddly escaped the notice of modern observers, but their story sheds light on the often curious histories of cultural symbols. How did the fasces get there? Stranger still, how did they escape effacement during our mid-century war with the Italian fascist regime? And how should we think about them today?

Fasces ornamentation had no nefarious connotation before Mussolini. In republican Rome, the chief magistrates were protected in public by lictors: bodyguards who each carried a fasces, a bundle of 12 rods tied together and surrounding outward-facing axes. The lictors used this unwieldy-looking scepter to chastise wrongdoers, and it came to symbolize the coercive power of the consul.

The use of fasces in public architecture across the United States was unremarkable. Fasces were part of the standard visual vocabulary of classicism. Like the lamp and the scales, they represented a particular attribute of the classical view of justice: physical power or the ability to impose order. The American Founders admired Roman republicanism, drawing from it both their pen names and many of their principles. Thus, the House of Representatives, in one of its first official acts in 1789, adopted the fasces as the emblem of its sergeant at arms. The House fasces—still visible to the Speaker’s right when the full House meets in the House chamber—has 13 rods, one more than in the Roman model, to represent the unified strength of the original American states. Yet despite their popularity in the Federal era, fasces weren’t a common motif in nineteenth-century architecture.

When he came to power in Italy in 1922, Mussolini resurrected the symbol and employed it to represent the strength and unity of the Italian state. Political fascism made physical power and the ability to impose order central to its ideology, and so the term “fascism” quickly became synonymous with authoritarian regimes. Mussolini made the fasces symbol almost as common in Italy as the Nazi swastika became in Hitler’s Germany. If people associate the fasces with fascism less than they associate the swastika with Nazism, it may simply be because Il Duce’s historical infamy pales beside Hitler’s (and that of our World War II ally, Stalin). Fasces were carved into countless Italian public buildings. An entire complex—the Littoria—was made to resemble giant stylized fasces. Mussolini put fasces on the Italian flag, stamps, military insignia, and even manhole covers. As early as 1922, the *Washington Post* reported that “Mussolini has ordered the coinage of money in a new design, bearing the fasces . . . ‘as the emblem of ancient Rome and the new Italy regenerated by the fascisti.’ ”

So when fasces started popping up on major federal buildings in Washington, D.C., in the 1920s and 1930s, no politically aware citizen could have been ignorant of the connotation. American architects knew of Mussolini’s grandiose building projects, and some publicly lauded them. Cass Gilbert, who designed the Supreme Court building, met Mussolini on a 1927 visit to Italy to procure marble for the project. No doubt Gilbert saw the countless fasces in Italian architecture. He was also favorably impressed by Il Duce himself. The man chiefly responsible for the Department of Justice’s sculptural features, C. Paul Jennewein, studied for three years at the American Academy in Rome. While there, he apparently developed a fondness for fasces: he also put them on the Arlington Memorial Bridge, completed in 1932. The Philadelphia firm overseeing the construction of the Department of Justice building (finished in 1935) brought over a young artist from Italy, Roger Morigi, to do some of the sculptural work. The choice of Morigi was itself unexceptional. Italian



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craftsmen were much in vogue for federal building projects—they had more experience and better training than American architects, as well as a certain cultural cachet. But given the prominence of the fasces in Mussolini’s propaganda, Morigi must have been aware that he wasn’t simply using ancient iconography.

The architects working on the federal buildings of the 1930s were also extremely conscious of the political symbolism they employed. They often looked to the socialist realism of Europe for inspiration. The Federal Trade Commission building, for instance, completed in 1938, is adorned with socialist-realist reliefs of brawny workers engaged in various industries.

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Today, it might seem improbable that American government projects would decorate themselves with symbols of European fascism, whatever the enthusiasms of architects. But at the time, Mussolini was widely admired by Americans for getting Italy back on its feet. "I'm pretty high on that bird,"

humorist Will Rogers said of Il Duce after visiting Italy and interviewing Mussolini. "Dictator form of government is the greatest form of government—that is, if you have the right dictator." The rise of fascism appeared to pose no direct threat to U.S. interests, and many saw it as a counterweight to scarier European movements. It was Bolshevism without the collectivization; Nazism without the racism.



American leaders reflected this benign view of Il Duce. Then in charge of federal building programs, the Treasury Department directed the Federal Triangle office-construction project. Andrew Mellon, who served as Treasury secretary until 1932, personally oversaw much of the planning and design for it. He was an early and durable Mussolini fan, who, among other things, helped the Italian regime secure favorable terms for its World War I debt. Mellon urged that Italian economic policies be imported into the New Deal. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, who served as Warren G. Harding's secretary of state from 1921 to 1925, also supported Mussolini. Having met him, Hughes said that he "could not help liking" the dictator. Much of the planning and some of the construction for the Federal Triangle project—which included the Department of Justice building—occurred during the Hoover administration (1929–33). In his memoirs, Hoover recalled that when he took office, Mussolini did not "worry anybody much." He also expressed the view that fascist Italy would

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have remained relatively innocuous had it not been "transformed" by its alliance with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

In June 1933, as construction proceeded on the Department of Justice building, President Franklin D. Roosevelt shared his enthusiasm about Mussolini in a letter to the American ambassador in Rome: "I am much interested and deeply impressed by what he has accomplished and by his restoring Italy and seeking to prevent general European trouble." In another letter, he praised Mussolini as "that admirable Italian gentleman." That same year, FDR asked Harry Hopkins to visit Italy to "look over the housing and

social insurance schemes. . . . [Y]ou might pick up some ideas useful to us in developing our own American plan for security." In 1939, Roosevelt looked back on his early optimism about the fascist "experiment." He noted that in the early 1930s, "Mussolini still maintained a semblance of parliamentary government, and there were many, including myself, who hoped that having restored order and morale, he would . . . work toward a restoration of democratic processes."

Americans found Il Duce much less *dolce* after his invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) in 1935, however. The war pitted the bloated and blustering Mussolini against the handsome and charismatic emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, a noble underdog who won the hearts of many Americans. And Abyssinia was just the beginning of Mussolini's fall from favor. Then came his alliance with Hitler, and finally war with the United States. Through all this, the fasces remained. Even as tens of thousands of Americans perished while

fighting fascist troops in North Africa and Italy, the enemy's emblem continued to be displayed at the Department of Justice, the Supreme Court, the Lincoln Memorial, and countless other Washington buildings. How the fasces survived is a mystery: Americans are sensitive, if not hypersensitive, to any potential endorsement of an enemy's culture, language, or creed in times of war. In World War I, growers went so far as to rename the humble sauerkraut, innocent of any political connotation, as "liberty cabbage."

The lone example of resistance to American fasces on anti-Mussolini grounds became an exception that proved the rule. Chicago's Grant Park monument to Italian aviator and fascist stalwart Italo Balbo is prominently emblazoned with fasces. Il Duce himself had donated it to the city in 1934 to honor his air force marshal, who had flown a squadron to Chicago for the World's Fair the year before. (The city also renamed Seventh Street as Balbo Drive.) The monument is dated "the 11th year of the fascist era," making the connection between the symbol and the movement explicit. In 1946, some Chicago aldermen tried, without success, to remove the memorial and rename the eponymous street.

As for the fasces on federal architecture, they appear not to have attracted any controversy, or even notice, in recent memory. The Department of Justice has published several pamphlets about its building. Only the most recent, a brochure published in celebration of the building's 50th anniversary, mentions the fasces at all—and then, only in passing, as "traditional emblems of authority."

Disputes about forgotten and now potentially offensive public symbols often arise during periods of restoration and repair. Yet even on this score, the fasces have managed to fly under the radar. The decorative fasces on the gates of the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium on Constitution Avenue, for example, still stand out from the rest of the building, thanks to the bold black-and-gold paint job they received in anticipation of the 1999 NATO summit. Two years earlier, New Jersey spent tens of thousands of dollars repainting the fasces inside the rotunda of Trenton's late-nineteenth-century capitol dome. No one objected to the symbols or their connotations.

This indifference continues, ironically, in an era of campaigns and lawsuits targeting everything from "Indian"-themed sports teams and school mascots to displays of Confederate flags and religious symbolism in the public square. The fasces have survived not just the Second World War but also, thus far, the Culture Wars. Perhaps their quiet persistence suggests that we need not always take offense at, or seek to purge, public symbols of outmoded or discredited political ideas. Such symbols may even have value for us today as historical reminders: lessons in humility, carved in stone.

Editors' note: Cass Gilbert was originally and mistakenly identified as Charles Gilbert.

from the magazine Eugene Kontorovich New York City spends \$1 billion a year trying to get schools built and repaired, with little result. Reason: the School Construction Authority can't do the job. Time to privatize.